

# OUTRAGED HUMANISM: THE FICTION OF A. B. YEHOSHUA

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A. B. YEHOSHUA directs his writing towards existential essentials, but his focus is deliberately narrow. "I am concerned with relationships among individuals," he once told an interviewer, "not with the individual confronting the universe, confronting his God or his homeland . . . I am concerned with people confronting people. This is the central focus. But I am not saying that other matters cannot come up in my work."<sup>1</sup> Other matters do come up. Mythical and archetypal configurations are discernable in many of Yehoshua's early works.<sup>2</sup> Stories such as "An Evening in Yatir Village" and "The Last Commander" touch upon the relationship of the individual to the universe and to God.<sup>3</sup> The entire body of Yehoshua's work reflects a constant and increasingly explicit concern with the problematic relationship of the Israeli to his new homeland.<sup>4</sup> But, on the whole, his fiction bears out the contention that such matters are peripheral to his concern with the existential significance of personal interaction.

Yehoshua is concerned with the essential connection between interpersonal relationships and individual being. The patterns of human interaction that recur

1. See Bezalel (1969, p. 11).

2. See discussions by Avinur (1974, pp. 136-138); Barzel (1974, pp. 154-155); and Shaked (1974, pp. 132-133, 137, 141).

3. See discussions by Dan (1975, pp. 332-334); and Shohet-Meiri (1972, pp. 40-44).

4. See discussions by Dan (1975, pp. 334-335); Kurzweil (1970, pp. 66-72); Mihali (1978, pp. 382-393); Ramras-Rauch (1970, pp. 253-256); Rezler-Bersohn (1978, pp. 173-174); and Shaked (1974, pp. 131, 139).

in his fiction reflect an acute awareness of the implications of what R. D. Laing has described as "the potentially tragic paradox that our relatedness to others is an essential aspect of our being as is our separateness."<sup>5</sup> This paradox is the matrix of much of Yehoshua's fiction. It involves a fundamental perception of human interdependency, of the extent to which every individual's sense of significant being is dependent upon the confirming recognition of the significance of his being by others. It also involves a perception of the dangerous extent to which the destiny of an individual may be determined by his pursuit of confirming recognition and may be affected by his failure to attain it.

Yehoshua's protagonists are often the victims of the combined force of their inner need for confirmation and society's relentless demand for conformity. They are repeatedly characterized by a disruption of that delicate balance between separateness and relatedness to others which is so essential to integrated being. In the ensuing imbalance the protagonist is often driven to define himself solely in the socially sanctioned terms of others. He thus abrogates the integrity of his individual identity and is set on a passive, self destructive course of constantly seeking to please and to obey. Yehoshua regards this condition of the individual as endemic but not inevitable. Underlying and informing his fiction is a belief in the capacity of individuals to progress towards authentic self-realization and an anger at their persistent failure to do so. Thus, the defeated protagonists of Yehoshua's intricately crafted parables of alienation and annihilation should not be regarded as manifestations of despairing nihilism but rather as expressions of outraged humanism.<sup>6</sup>

"Death of the Old Man," the opening story of Yehoshua's first collection of short fiction,<sup>7</sup> established a thematic motif that was to be explored and expanded in many of his subsequent works. The story is an allegorical depiction of the pathetic condition and tragic consequences of sacrificing separateness to relatedness and equating identity with conformity. The nameless narrator of this story is a man who is radically out of touch with his inner, separate self and who consequently defines himself entirely by conforming to the absurd communal standards proclaimed by his domineering neighbor, Mrs. Ashtor.

5. Laing (1966, p. 26).

6. This view is a departure from the mainstream of critical opinion concerning Yehoshua's existential vision. The controlling thesis of Shaked's (1974) extensive discussion of Yehoshua's fiction is that this fiction is shaped by "a profound Thanatic impulse," that it is an expression of "yearnings for death" (p. 129). Shohet-Meiri (1972), who perceives Yehoshua's work as "an attack on the substance and significance of being human" (p. 39), accepts Shaked's Thanatic thesis (published in the first, 1971, edition of his book). She regards Yehoshua's fiction as "a hymn to Thanatos," and an expression of "a cynical, pessimistic view of life" (p. 60). Kurzweil (1970) writes that Yehoshua's stories reveal "the nothingness that lies at our doorstep" (p. 68), and that they express "the self-negating denial of existence" (p. 71).

7. Yehoshua (1963).

Energetic and eloquent, Mrs. Ashtor is a self-appointed but generally accepted arbiter of social norms and personal fates. As such she is in a position to bestow approval on those who conform to the accepted social standards and to condemn those who do not. Mrs. Ashtor's effects on the subservient narrator and on the other approval-seeking people around her reveal the human degradation and annihilation resulting from the inclination to regard social approval as confirmation of individual value.

The grotesque action decreed by Mrs. Ashtor, then sanctioned and carried out by the society she dominates, is the live burial of an old man whose indefatigable vitality and vigor constitute an intolerable affront to the established norms of conduct expected of the aged. The old man is condemned due to his unwitting failure to conform. But his execution is made possible only due to the deliberate conformity of individuals who are willing to repudiate their own humanity and deny the humanity of others for the sake of obtaining the confirming recognition of society.

The prestigious academic establishment, with its titled hierarchy and exacting standards of acceptance and rejection, provides Yehoshua with a rich metaphorical context for his concern with the hazards of substituting a socially sanctioned role for a genuinely realized identity. A number of his protagonists are young scholars who shut themselves off from life and devote themselves to spurious research projects in the hope of attaining the social identity conferred by an academic position or degree. "I, too, want a certificate," pleads the nameless scholar of "The End"<sup>8</sup> who has severed his ties with the world, sacrificed the love of his wife, the health of his son and seven years of his life writing a worthless dissertation on "Methods of Mortification and Torture of the Early Priests in the Matarone Kingdom." His sole motivation in this undertaking is the desire to be recognized by his superior, Professor Raupantzer. Much like Mrs. Ashtor, Raupantzer is a formidable figure of arbitrary authority endowed with the power of bestowing or withholding a socially approved seal of recognition.

The perpetual student in "Facing the Forests" has no genuine interest in the topic of his projected research nor in the validity of his findings. His friends suggest the Crusades and he accepts their suggestion because

everyone must specialize in a certain area. He could actually become a little scholar, if he didn't waste his time. All he had to do was to bring some astounding scientific theory back from the forests. His friends would find ways to justify it.<sup>9</sup>

8. Yehoshua, "Hassiyum" (1963, p. 128). My translation.

9. Yehoshua, "Mul hayya'arot" (1975, pp. 95-96, 136). All subsequent references to Yehoshua's stories, unless otherwise noted, are to the collected edition *Ad horep-1974* and will

But the fecundity of the forest soon overpowers the aridity of his historical texts. The student is gradually drawn away from his research as well as from many other socially sanctioned conventions. He allows his beard to grow wild, his clothes to fall apart and his fire-watching duties to be neglected. This appears to be a liberating process in the course of which the student experiences a growing communion with the natural environment of the forest and with the mute, dispossessed Arab who inhabits it. No longer concerned with his social identity, the student slowly acquires an independent moral identity. Thus, when the friends he left behind, fearing that he may actually come up with a novel idea that will enhance his academic stature at the expense of their own, send an emissary to inquire, the student is able to reply: "Novel ideas? Possibly, though not what they have in mind . . . not exactly scientific . . . more human . . ." (114, 162).

In "Facing the Forests," as in "The End" and "Flood Tide," the narrative point of departure is that of a young man seeking to define himself by attaining a socially confirmed identity. In three of his later stories Yehoshua expands his perception of the perilous equation of real self with social self by shifting his perspective from a young man's quest for social identity to an older man's loss of such an identity. "A Poet's Continuing Silence," "A Long Hot Day" and "Early in the Summer of 1970" all center on the crisis of a man who finds himself deprived of the social identity by which he had long come to define himself. In every instance the loss of a socially recognized role is responded to as a complete loss of identity and results in the degradation and annihilation of the individual. Both the aging poet of "A Poet's Continuing Silence," who can no longer write, and the ailing engineer of "A Long Hot Day," who can no longer build, experience the loss of their social identities. Both find themselves reduced to a state of perpetual anguish, increasing alienation and encroaching sense of doom, not because they can no longer work or create but because they are no longer recognized by others as valuable individuals.

The appalling implications of a total subordination of the self to its social identity are evoked in Yehoshua's fine novella, "Early in the Summer of

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appear in the text followed by an italicized reference to the English version of the work discussed. Unfortunately most of the English translations of Yehoshua's works are disturbingly inadequate. In order to preserve the authenticity of the original I repeatedly found it necessary to provide my own translations. Consequently, the italicized page references indicate, for the most part, the place in which a different version of the quoted text may be found in the English translation. The English translations referred to may be found in the following texts: "An Evening in Yatir Village" — Penuei (1965); "A Poet's Continuing Silence," "Three Days and a Child," "Facing the Forests," "Flood Tide," "A Long Hot Day, His Despair, His Wife and His Daughter" — Yehoshua (1970); "Early in Summer of 1970," "Missile Base 612," "The Last Commander" — Yehoshua (1977a).

1970." The protagonist is an old Bible teacher, long scheduled for retirement but stubbornly clinging to his socially sanctioned role as a schoolmaster. When he is mistakenly informed that his son, a young professor with radical views, has been killed in action, the father's intense grief is mingled with gratification at having acquired a new, socially recognized identity. He is now a Bereaved Parent. Furthermore, the old man, who senses that both he and his values are anachronisms, begins to dream of assuming the values and the social identity of the son he believes to be dead:<sup>10</sup>

Suddenly I think of you, of you only, ardently, hungrily, my casualty, my only one . . . At long last I have seen your papers. You were afraid I wouldn't understand, but I did, immediately. And I am excited, burning and despairing of you. You came back to prophesy here, I am with you, son of man, I have filled my pockets with your notes, I shall learn English in a proper fashion, I shall ascend to the mountains and wait for the wind.<sup>11</sup>

From its very beginnings Yehoshua's fiction considered alternatives to the equation of the essence of being with the substance of conformity. Two of his early stories suggest that mere rebellion against a socially determined existence may be no less futile than compliance with it. In "The Day's Sleep"<sup>12</sup> the protagonist joins Lubrani, a fellow construction worker, in a defiant rejection of the enervating drabness of an existence determined by the work ethos of pioneering Israel. In "The Last Commander" a company of soldiers follow their officer, Yignon, in an absolute rejection of the physical, mental and moral rigors of Israel's military ethos.<sup>13</sup> But in both cases no real alternative is provided. Both Lubrani and Yignon lead their followers to an abdication from the constraints of their existence through an orgiastic indulgence in sleep. But escapist inertia is no less degenerative than accommodating conformity. The protest and grief that precede the final submission of Lubrani's disciple to an existence of sleep (p. 40) suggest that this is a choice made not out of conviction in its validity but rather for lack of a better alternative.

Yehoshua's protagonists repeatedly fail to find a satisfying alternative. But the nature of their failures provides an indication of Yehoshua's conception of the direction in which such an alternative should be sought. The vision informing much of Yehoshua's fiction is strikingly akin to Martin Buber's postulation that

10. For a discussion of the father and son as representatives of diverging generations see Haefrati (1977, pp. 166 ff).

11. Yehoshua (1974, pp. 27, 33-34).

12. Yehoshua, "Tardemat hayyom" (1974, p. 31).

13. The thematic correspondence between the two stories has been noted by Moked (1968) who regards both as "a protest against modern mechanisms of oppression" (p. 30).

The basis of man's life is twofold, and it is one — the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by man; and the innate capacity of man to confirm his fellow-man in this way. That this capacity lies so immeasurably fallow constitutes the real weakness and questionableness of the human race: actual humanity exists only where this capacity unfolds.<sup>14</sup>

Like Buber, Yehoshua regards the universal failure of individuals to exercise their innate capacity for confirming others as the characterizing flaw of the human community and the major obstacle in the way of individual self-realization. This arrested capacity for mutual confirmation is a central concern and a major shaping force in Yehoshua's work. Consequently, his fictional world is starkly devoid of what Buber refers to as 'actual humanity.' His characters tear at each other, driven by their unheeded need for confirmation. Yehoshua's perception of the dependency of the individual's vital sense of significant identity on the confirming recognition of others is attended by his outrage and despair at the general failure of people to extend such recognition to one another. His fiction is a constantly expanding exploration of the contours and consequences of this fundamental failure.

In observing that "no more fiendish punishment could be devised than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all members thereof," William James provides an accurate delineation of the type of human agony Yehoshua is concerned with. His fictional reality is one in which individuals are constantly being subjected to harrowing variations of James' most fiendish punishment. His protagonists are repeatedly placed in the psychologically untenable position of being denied recognition as significant individuals. Their reactions reflect the dehumanizing consequences of such a repudiation.

The inhuman denial of confirmation breeds an inhuman, often violent, attempt to obtain it. Given the inherent need for recognition, any form of recognition is preferred to total neglect. Thus, once their positive attempts to attain recognition are rebuffed, Yehoshua's protagonists often resort to extremes of depravity and violence. The vision that emerges from the fiction is that of an extremely vicious circle in which the victims of rejection turn victimizers. The unconfirmed seek recognition by inflicting pain and violence on those who, by denying them recognition, deny the essential validity of their being. An inescapable implication of this vision is that much of the overt violence that occurs between individuals, perhaps even nations, is an often unconscious response to the more subtly covert violence of denied confirmation.

"An Evening in Yatir Village," one of Yehoshua's fine early stories, is an intricate parable of the anguished condition and dehumanizing consequences of

14. Buber (1957, p. 102).

denied confirmation. The evening express train that streaks through Yatir is the focal point of life in the isolated village and the metaphorical center of the story. It is contrasted with the local railroad station built by the village founders in the hope that it "would serve as a junction and central terminal in the complex railroad network that was to cut through this mountainous land" (10, 281). The station, then, was to serve a dual purpose: it would both connect the isolated villagers with the rest of the world and constitute a confirmation of the significance and value of the village community. But these hopes were soon dashed. It "suddenly became evident that Yatir was at a horrifying distance from any other settlement . . . and the train station that carried their fondest hope became a small, insignificant mountain stop" for a single, pre-dawn freight train. The pleas of the village elders that the magnificent passenger train be permitted to stop, even momentarily, at the Yatir station were denied by the railroad officials with the claim that the train "was in too much of a hurry to stop at this insignificant mountain village." (10, 281).

The speeding, oblivious train embodies the denial of communication and confirmation and consequently becomes the object of extreme violence caused by such denial. Serving as a daily reminder of their isolation and insignificance, the train arouses in the villagers "a dim feeling of deep yearning and impotent rage, repressed and restrained" (p. 10, 281). This repressed rage is finally released when the villagers embrace Ziva's suggestion that they cause a train disaster. Bardon, the village secretary who undertakes the implementation of the young woman's plan, explains that it was actually in the hope of witnessing such a disaster that the villagers gathered every evening to watch the train pass. "Because no other hopes were left to us by the honorable railroad officials" (p. 17, 289).

Bardon's explanations make it clear that the secret wish for a catastrophe is a direct result of the villagers' acute sense of isolation and insignificance.<sup>15</sup> When Arditi, the station master and sole voice of sane humanity in Yatir, asks, "but what about the passengers? . . . the people themselves? . . .," Bardon's response reveals the essential motivation behind the proposed carnage:

It is these very people we seek. Those who pass by our homes every night. The strangers that pass us by. And what is it we want if not to meet them, to know them, to grieve over them? . . . How terrible it is to see the train crashing in our mountain storm . . . and how great will be our responsibility to rescue from the disaster" (p. 18, 289-290).

This grotesquely inhuman argument makes both symbolic and psychological sense. The hopes dashed by the smooth operation of the railroad are to be

15. Gross (1975) points out that one of the etymological connotations of the name "Yatir" is "superfluous" or "unnecessary" (p. 66).

revived by its violent disruption. The denial of confirmation debases the villagers' humanity, making them indifferent to the humanity of others and driving them to violent extremes. They resolve to reaffirm their denied significance and re-establish contact with others by derailing the express train and mounting a magnificent, compassionate rescue operation for the survivors. Yehoshua is relentless in his ironic depiction of the human price extracted by the failure of mutual confirmation. The final movement of "An Evening in Yatir" plumbs the depths of the resulting degradation when Ziva, originator of the derailment plan, serenely contemplates the best way to fix the blame for the disaster on Arditi, its sole opponent.

The pattern of denied confirmation resulting in extremes of moral abdication is expanded and substantiated in the relationship between Ziva and the young signal man who narrates the story. This relationship is essentially analogous to the relationship between the community of Yatir and the symbolic Evening Express. While the villagers are responding to an untenable communal rejection, the nameless narrator is afflicted by a very personal instance of rejection. He is in love with Ziva. She knows this but deliberately evades him and rejects his love (p. 12, 283). A perceptive and intelligent observer, the narrator is aware of the appalling immorality of Ziva's derailment plan and the moral validity of Arditi's opposition. But he also realizes that his compliance will enable him to break through the barrier of Ziva's rejection. The latter consideration prevails. Deliberately playing the innocent fool, the narrator denies Arditi's silent plea for a "partner to his humane ideas" and agrees to play a central part in the murderous derailment.

In some ways the character of Ziva is a direct descendent of Mrs. Ashtor. But in Ziva the figure of the authoritarian old hag, corruptor of communities and destroyer of individuals, is transformed into a desirable but maddeningly elusive young woman. In her callous, manipulative relationship with the narrator, Ziva is an embodiment of the devastating denial of individual value and the prototype for virtually all of Yehoshua's subsequent female characters. The metaphorical paradigm of abused love, established in the relationship between Ziva and the young signal man, informs many of Yehoshua's subsequent stories. It is a cogent metaphor since the love of one person to another is the ultimate confirmation of the beloved's individual value. Conversely, the rejection of a person's love is the ultimate denial of that person's value. Consequently, various configurations of rejected love constitute the metaphorical context of a number of stories depicting the causal relationship between denied confirmation and inhuman reaction.

Galia, the frail, careless bride of "Galia's Wedding," flits from man to man arousing love and discarding lovers, totally oblivious to the anguish she is



causing. Haya of "Three Days and a Child," who is similarly frail and careless, has a "talent for treating people as if they were objects" (204, 62). She thoughtlessly rejects the narrator's professed love and callously abuses it when the need arises. The wives in "A Long Hot Day" and "Missile Base 612" are equally oblivious to the anguish of their husbands whose love they have rejected and in whose presence they do little more than sleep. But in all these instances what really affects the rejected lovers and drives them to extremes of inhuman conduct is not the loss of their beloved but the loss of their sense of individual value.

"We have forgotten her," says one of Galia's former lovers. "Only the insult of rejection still burns in us" (p. 51). Characteristically, rejection leads to violence. It is their outraged sense of wounded pride that drives the former lovers to Galia's wedding, to seek out and assault the man who, by being preferred over them, embodies the affront to their sense of individual value.

The motif of injurious reaction to rejected love recurs in "A Long Hot Day." In this story Yehoshua uses a malignant disease as a metaphor for the effects of denied confirmation. The protagonist, an ailing engineer, is a victim of both social and personal disregard. He is considered unnecessary by his engineering firm. He is rejected, betrayed and totally ignored by his wife. The advancing cancer from which he suffers parallels his growing sense of helpless alienation, isolation and despair. Having despaired of regaining the love of his indifferent wife, the engineer makes a pathetic attempt to attain some measure of recognition by insinuating himself into the life of his adolescent daughter, Tamara. He seeks to have his usefulness affirmed by the help he can offer to Tamara with her high school math problems. He seeks confirmation of his mere physical presence by imposing himself silently on the company of Tamara and her friends. But pathos turns into inhumanity when, in his fear of losing even this last vestige of confirmation, the engineer, who has despaired of love, acts to deny the possibility of love to others.

Afraid that the budding relationship between Tamara and her young admirer, Gadi, will make his isolation absolute, that "she herself might fall in love . . . and he, here, will remain alone, tormented and pacing under a warm fan," (174, 230), the engineer seeks to abort the relationship by intercepting and withholding Gadi's love letters. When his attempts at keeping the young lovers apart fail, the anguished engineer, rolling downhill in his disabled car (which has become a symbol of his deteriorating condition) strikes and injures Gadi in a symbolic act of unconscious aggression.

"Three Days and a Child" is more encompassing than the earlier stories in its range of fully realized thematic concerns. But the condition and consequences of denied confirmation are still very central to it. Once again, the

circumstances of heedlessly rejected love constitute the metaphorical context of the story. Dov's love is rejected by Haya who later marries Ze'ev.<sup>16</sup> Although there is no question as to the depth of Dov's persistent love for Haya, the fundamental cause of his anguish is not the fact that Haya was lost to him but that her rejection of his love was an intolerable denial of his individual value. Dov is clearly repeating the inhuman pattern of Haya's conduct towards him in his callous mistreatment of her son, Yahli. But the primary motive behind his shocking determination to kill the child is not vengeance but rather the desperate need to attain the recognition that had been denied to him.

Paying a compulsive visit to the pregnant Haya and her husband, Dov eavesdrops on them in their bedroom. He is dismayed and outraged, not because Haya is now sharing an intimate relationship with another but because he regards his exclusion from this intimacy as a denial of his very existence. "They did not mention me at all," he rages to himself. "As if I hadn't come, as if I hadn't been born at all" (205, 64). The opportunity to redress this affront occurs some three years later when Dov is unexpectedly entrusted with the care of Haya's son. Yahli's strong resemblance to his mother elicits at first an onrush of excitement and joy (201, 203). Dov is determined to lavish attention on Yahli, to fulfill all his wishes as if the boy were a beloved woman (206–207). But later in the day, observing Yahli climb a dangerously high wall, Dov is suddenly excited by a realization of the possibilities for confirmation inherent in the event of the boy's falling to his death:

One careless motion and he would shatter on the ground. But I did not care. On the contrary, I was excited. . . I thought: If the child were to fall now she would remember me well. I would be engraved on one of the pictures of her mind, if only as a figure dozing on a bench. (210, 70)

Dov realizes that a direct involvement in Yahli's death would not only force Haya to acknowledge his existence, it would make him an inextricable part of her life. What he failed to attain by the offering of his self in love he would finally accomplish by destroying the self of another. This realization swiftly transforms Dov's attitude towards Yahli from tender to murderous. But it is confirmation and acceptance that are on Dov's mind when he fantasizes about the effect that Yahli's death would have on his relationship with Haya and Ze'ev:

The wondrous fact that they would never let me go, that it would be impossible to let me go, that they would cling to me, engulf me, as if their son were hidden

16. This metaphorical context is complicated and enriched by Yehoshua's inclusion of a second variation of the same pattern in "Three Days and a Child": Zvi's love is rejected by Yael, who prefers Dov.

inside me. That they would adopt me as a son. For I have long given up on love.  
(240, 111)

In introducing his retrospective narrative, Dov notes that it is still necessary to determine what prevented him from killing the child. The answer to this is suggested by an event that takes place on the third and last day of Yahli's stay. Dov tells the boy a fable in which the animals are the Hebrew nominal equivalents of the male characters in "Three Days and a Child": the bear (Dov), the wolf (Ze'ev) and the deer (Zvi). They, their mates and their offspring engage in vicious battles and most of them die difficult and unusual deaths. Yahli is especially distressed by the fate of the wolf cubs who are made to drown in the river (being the son of Ze'ev, Yahli himself is a wolf cub). In the midst of telling the fable Dov realizes that despite his cruelty towards the child, Yahli has come to love him and, at the moment, prefers him over his parents:

Unwittingly he has already placed his hand on my shoulder and is secretly stroking my hair. He has actually fallen in love with me. I explore to see if he still remembers his parents. Yes, he remembers but they are no longer important. (251, 125)

This expression of love and preference is an act of healing confirmation which causes a complete reorientation of Dov's attitude towards Yahli and constitutes the final reason for his decision to spare him. In a sudden reversal of intentions Dov tends to the ailing Yahli then continues his fable, determined "to destroy all living creatures and plants except for one small wolf-cub that will be spared" (251, 125). Dov and Yahli's moment of mutually expressed and received affection is unprecedented in Yehoshua's fiction. Its occurrence and redeeming consequences constitute a positive aspect of the existential vision suggested by the earlier works. It affirms both the human potential for and the humanizing effect of mutual confirmation.

A distinct line of development in Yehoshua's fiction is an increasingly explicit concern with the social, ideological and moral crises of contemporary Israel. This is not a radical departure from his original concerns but rather an almost inevitable extension of them. It reflects, among other things, an awareness that the ultimate test of a set of abstract existential premises is their actual applicability to everyday life. Yehoshua puts his premises to such a test in his latest work and first novel, *The Lover*.<sup>17</sup> By concentrating on the internal agonies of a representative Israeli family in its daily comings and goings, *The Lover* depicts the devitalization and decay of the Zionist ideals in present-day Israel. The involvement of Adam's family with his young Arab apprentice, Naim, provides Yehoshua with the means of conducting a sensitive exploration

17. Yehoshua (1977a, 1978). All subsequent references to these books are in the text.

of the complex emotional dilemmas of Jewish and Arab coexistence in Israel. But Yehoshua's conception of Israeli reality, while relevant to its immediate historical context, transcends this context and serves as a validation of his basic existential premises. There is a direct correspondence between Yehoshua's general view of denied confirmation as a primary cause of dehumanizing alienation and his specific perceptions of Israeli reality.

Anguished alienation is the common condition of all the characters in *The Lover*. The individual loneliness and alienation of the members of Adam's family are echoed and amplified by the communal alienation of the Arabs in Israel. The Israeli Arabs are regarded as actual victims of William James' hypothetical "most vicious punishment" of social oblivion. "They don't hate us," Naim says of the Israeli Jews. "Anyone who thinks they hate us is completely wrong. We're beyond hatred, for them we are like shadows" (153, 121). The reaction of many of the Arab characters to this condition is in full accord with Yehoshua's usual perception of the consequences of denied confirmation. Some, like Naim's brother Adnan who becomes a terrorist, resort to mindless, self-destructive violence in order to assert their identity. Others, like Naim's father who is an informer for the Israeli authorities, surrender their identity in abasement. But the new departure and central achievement of *The Lover* is the vital, complex character of Naim himself.

In his struggle to puzzle out his identity and attain a sense of existential validity, Naim rejects the extreme alternatives of violence and abasement. The uprooted young Arab is the first of Yehoshua's paradigmatic victims of denied recognition who explores and affirms the possibilities of a positive solution to his plight. "I'm not here for politics but for love" (255, 204), Naim proclaims to himself, expressing, I believe, Yehoshua's conviction that confirming recognition is the essential basis for viable relations among nations as well as individuals. Naim's ambivalent relationship with Veducha, the ancient survivor of the old Jewish community in Jerusalem, becomes increasingly considerate and caring. The intensity of his youthful love for Dafi, the new-generation Israeli, sustains their tentative, faltering relationship till the barrier-breaking moment of its consummation. Naim is the first of Yehoshua's protagonists whose love is not casually and cruelly rejected.

Yehoshua underscores his corresponding concern with the problem of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel and the dangers of denied confirmation by counterpoising the figure of the disregarded Israeli Arab with the figure of Adam, a subjugating Israeli Jew. "People put themselves in my hands sometimes . . . and sometimes I take them" (112, 81), observes Adam who takes and uses Naim, Gabriel, Tali and others with a total disregard for the emotional price he is extracting from them. "I'm only a boy," says Naim, "and he [Adam] has already made me so lonely. So terribly lonely" (396, 319).

The destructive role, heretofore ascribed by Yehoshua to the stylized figure of a slender *belle dame sans merci*, is shifted in *The Lover* to the fully realized character of Adam, the burly garage owner. It appears that this shift signifies an expansion of Yehoshua's thematic concern. His previous works were almost exclusively concerned with the effects of denied confirmation on its victims. This concern is still central to *The Lover*, but it is no longer exclusive. The Adam-Naim dialectic expands the scope of Yehoshua's concern to include not only the object of denied confirmation but the denier as well. This added dimension may well be a manifestation of Yehoshua's growing concern with the psychic and social damage caused to his own people by being the subjugators of others. Clearly, *The Lover* is no less concerned with Adam than it is with Naim. And it reveals the internal consequences of denying confirmation as being no less damaging — perhaps even more so — than those of being denied.

Both Adam and Naim are afflicted by isolation and alienation. But while Naim's condition is imposed by external circumstances, Adam's is self-imposed. In order to maintain his control Adam deliberately disassociates himself from his Arab subordinates:

I don't get involved with him [Hamid, his Arab foreman] nor with the others. I've always refrained from visiting their villages and being a guest in their homes . . . It always ends in trouble, they end up taking advantage of you. In general I've begun to disengage myself in recent years. (160, 126).

It is little wonder that the Arab workers respond in kind. They follow the example of their taciturn foreman and become extremely reticent in their relationship with Adam, cutting him off from all the personal aspects of their lives.

While the depiction of Adam's relationship with his Arab subordinates is a relevant representation of an actual social situation, it should also be regarded as a metaphor for the broader consequences of a persistently unconfirming stance. Just as Adam's withholding of confirmation extends beyond his Arab workers so does the resulting process of disengagement. "All he tries to do," observes Naim, "is not to touch people and not be touched by them" (164, 129). The ironic perception that emerges from *The Lover* is that the fate of the abuser is, in essence, identical to that of the abused. The inevitable disengagement resulting from his unconfirming stance increasingly removes Adam from the sphere of positive human contact which is essential to a viable sense of identity. Consequently, Adam's progressive disengagement is attended by a growing sense of alienation, futility and self doubt.

Adam's attempts to recapture his receding sense of significant identity are no less extreme, misdirected and futile than those of the protagonists of

Yehoshua's earlier works. His procurement of Gabriel as a lover for his wife, Asya, and his seduction of the vacuous, adolescent Tali, are both desperate attempts to confirm the validity of his emotions and the viability of his existence. Both attempts are abortive. For, being extensions of his manipulative attitude towards others, they fail to provide the humanizing context of mutual confirmation which, as Martin Buber has it, is "the basis of man's life." *The Lover* is a novel of outrage at the failings of mankind in general and of Israeli society in particular, but it is not a novel of despair. The affirmative strand that emerged from "Three Days and a Child" and was worked into the character of Naim is, in the final movement of the novel, extended to Adam as well.

Adam is last seen standing alone by Gabriel's broken-down Morris, which has become a symbol of the deterioration of both Adam and the society he represents. Having returned Naim to his native village, Adam tries to turn the old car around but "the engine fails. The lights go out. The battery is completely dead" (434, 351). Suddenly aware of his need "to start from the beginning," Adam realizes that, expert mechanic that he is, he alone cannot revive the "dead old car from '47." He needs the help of another. Adam's final words, "I must look for Hamid," suggest the beginning of a new existential orientation. They convey a recognition that a viable new beginning, on both the individual and national level, must be based on mutual confirmation of the essential value of the other. This recognition substantiates the exuberant note of affirmation which concludes Naim's final monologue and the novel as a whole: "The people will wonder what happened to Naim that he is suddenly so full of hope —."

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